

Fast food nutrition – is it possible?

America has been called a 'fast food nation,' and for good reason. Everyday, one out of four Americans eats fast food. Most do it for the convenience – lack of time leads many people to the drive thru, and money plays a part as well. If you are eating out, fast food restaurants are often the cheapest option. Unfortunately, fast food restaurants are not the most nutritious option. Generally, fast food meals are higher in calories, sodium and fat, and often lacking in important vitamins and minerals. Until recently, french fries were the only vegetable option at many fast food restaurants. By most standards, it is a stretch to call fast food french fries a vegetable. Restaurant dining poses similar challenges. Restaurant meals also tend to include too much fat, salt, or sugar, and portions are almost always larger than normal.

While fast food restaurants may not offer the healthiest options, most people find themselves eating fast food from time to time. How can you make the most of your fast food meal? For that matter, how can you make the most of any restaurant meal? The good news is that many restaurants, fast food and sit-down, are adding healthier menu options. It is now possible to eat a fairly nutritious meal on the go. Keep in mind portion control (no super sizing), high fat and calorie sauces and dressings (eliminate them or take them on the side and use sparingly), and sodas (drink water or low fat milk). Making good choices when you are eating out will help you maintain a healthy diet. Knowing what types of menu items are healthier than others can help limit temptation and will also help you encourage your children and grandchildren to make healthy choices as well.

What are some healthy fast food choices?

Fast food restaurants have added many new healthy options. Most fast food restaurants and restaurant chains post nutritional information about their food offerings on their web sites. Visit some of the sites to determine your choices are. If you decide what you can and should order before you arrive, it will make it easier to avoid the less nutritious, higher calorie options. Also, pay attention to changes in the menu and new offerings because many restaurants are finally starting to pay attention to the demand for healthy options. Many restaurants try new items out before they add them to the menu permanently.

When choosing, be aware of highly caloric additions such as salad dressings, cheese, sour cream, etc. Sometimes, making your choice healthier is as simple as removing the condiments. For example, ask for a grilled chicken sandwich without the mayonnaise. Many restaurants are making progress and offering alternatives like salads with low calorie, fat free dressings, or grilled chicken sandwiches on whole wheat rolls, but if they don't, see what you can do to make your choice more nutritious and less fattening. Some healthy fast food choices include:

- Grilled chicken or fish sandwich
- Whole wheat rolls
- Fruit or fruit and yogurt
- Baked potato (with vegetables instead of cheese, butter or sour cream)
- Salad with dressing on the side or fat free salad dressing
- Single hamburger (regular or children's size)
- Low fat deli sandwiches on wheat bread or on pita bread
- Wraps on whole wheat tortillas (without dressing)
- Fat free / low fat milk or water

For more information, the Heart and Stroke foundation provides a colorful brochure, [Fast Foods While Dining Out](#) (PDF), with tips for managing portion size and choosing healthy foods while dining out. Also, Nutrition Action Healthletter's [Fast Food in '05](#) helps you sort out many fast food options to help you make healthy choices when dining out.

What are the least healthy fast food choices?

While the choice of meal can be unhealthy, oftentimes it is the condiment or side order that packs in the fat and calories. Additionally, drinks are often a significant source of nutritionally empty calories. (For example, a large cola (32 ounces) has 310 calories.) Make your beverage selection healthier by switching to water or low fat milk. Some particularly unhealthy menu choices include:

- Chicken nuggets
- Croissant breakfast sandwiches (and croissants or pastries in general)
- Fried fish or fried chicken sandwiches
- Fried chicken
- Large and jumbo size fries
- Onion rings

As mentioned above, condiments often contain significant calories and fat. As an example Newman's Own Ranch dressing (offered at McDonald's) contains 170 calories and 15 grams of fat per serving. Choosing Newman's Own Low Fat Balsamic Vinaigrette brings the totals down to 40 calories and 3 grams of fat. Unhealthy condiments and some sample calorie and fat counts include:

- Most 'special sauce'
- Mayonnaise
- Cheese sauce
- Salad dressing
- Tartar sauce
- Ketchup

The Fast Food Nutrition Guide ([see below](#)) can help you find nutritional information for your favorite fast food restaurant offerings (the restaurants are listed in a sidebar on the left side of the page).

What are good fast food and restaurant suggestions for children?

Whether you are dining out with your children or grandchildren, it is important to know how to make good fast food and restaurant choices. Children love to eat out, but the growing numbers of overweight and obese children mean that adults need to take more responsibility for proper nutrition, and more importantly, help children make good choices. Nearly one-third of children eat fast food every day, and those children who do eat fast food tend to consume more calories on a daily basis. These increased calories lead to increased pounds and add to the child's risk of becoming overweight. It is important to keep this in mind when you are thinking about taking your children or grandchildren out to eat with you. These facts make it all the more important to think about making healthy choices. When you find yourself out to eat with children, particularly at fast food restaurants, keep in mind some of the main points outlined above. That being said, it might be hard to persuade your youngster to order a salad instead of a cheeseburger, but you can steer them towards healthier options. Below are some important things to remember about fast food/restaurant dining for kids.

- Soda is highly caloric and not nutritious – kids should have water or milk instead.
- Avoid chicken nuggets – fried nuggets are sorry imposters of real chicken.
- Skip the fries - consider taking along a bag of mini carrots, grapes or other fruits and vegetables to have instead. This will add vitamins and fiber to the meal.
- Order the kids meal with some substitutions. Children often love the kid's meal more for the fun box and toys than for the food. Let them order the kid's meal, but ask to make substitutions for the soda and the fries if possible. Many restaurants are making it easier to substitute and all usually have water and milk available as beverage options. In sit-down restaurants, help them opt for chicken and vegetables or spaghetti with tomato sauce rather than a big plate of macaroni and cheese.

What are some general guidelines for eating out and staying healthy?

Following a few simple rules when you are eating out will make it possible to maintain your nutritious diet even when you are away from home or on the road.

1. **Order food to go** – Studies show that people tend to consume more food when they are not eating at their own kitchen tables. When you take fast food home, you also have the option of providing a healthier side dish such as fruit or vegetables.
2. **Avoid buffets** – All-you-can-eat buffets promote overeating. If the temptation isn't in front of you, you are less likely to overindulge.
3. **Stick to the light menu/Make careful menu selections** – Many restaurants indicate healthy choices on their menus, and most sit-down places will modify menu items

- on your request. Additionally, fast food restaurants now offer a wider range of healthy choices and most will provide nutritional information on all of their offerings by request. Knowing how food is prepared can be a good indication of whether it will work with your diet or ruin it. Main courses which have been baked, broiled, roasted, poached or steamed will be more healthy than anything fried. Salads with plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and lighter dressings will be better than salads with croutons, cheeses, meats and heavy dressings.
4. **Don't be afraid to special order** – Most restaurants have plenty of things that are good for you, but they are served in heavy sauces. Ask for your vegetables and main dishes to be served without the sauces. Ask if things are fried or cooked in oil or butter – if they are, see if you can order them in a more healthy way. Many restaurants, even fast food restaurants are happy to accommodate your requests.
 5. **Watch portion size** – At a typical restaurant, a single serving provides enough calories for at least two meals. Portion sizes at restaurants are usually double or triple what a person would normally eat so it is important to keep that in mind when ordering and eating. If it is possible to order a smaller portion (often called 'half sizes'), that will help eliminate the temptation to overeat. If you can't order smaller portions, it is a good rule of thumb to leave at least one-third to one-half of the meal on your plate. Or, separate your meal before you start eating so that you create a distinction between what you are going to eat in the restaurant and what you want to take home. Ordering something that will reheat easily will provide you with a delicious lunch or dinner the next day.
 6. **Share** – Sharing entrees, appetizers and desserts with dining partners is a great idea. It allows you to sample something that you really want to have while also helping you avoid the temptation to overindulge. If you are sharing with a friend or your partner, your portion size is automatically reduced and there is less available to eat. It is still important to make good menu choices, but sharing might make dessert (or something else indulgent) more of an option.
 7. **Order sauce and dressing on the side** – If you ask for sauces and dressings on the side, you can control the amount that you eat. Often you can use less than is normally used and still enjoy the same taste.
 8. **Remember the big picture** – Think of eating out in the context of your whole diet. If it is a special occasion or a fun social occasion and you know you want to order your favorite meal at a nice restaurant, cut back on your earlier meals that day. Moderation is always key, but planning ahead can help you relax and enjoy your dining out experience without sacrificing good nutrition or diet control.

The most important thing to remember when eating out is to think of it as part of your overall healthy eating plan. Try to order wisely and if portions are big or the food is rich, consider taking some of it home for a meal the next day. Also, consider sharing entrees, appetizers or desserts with dining partners or friends. Everything in moderation is a wise guideline to follow when considering the menu at your favorite restaurant

Source: Helpguide, Center for Healthy Aging, The Rotary Club of Santa Monica, a non-profit organization for mental health and wellness.